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ABSTRACT

The hypotheses (1) that the predominant characteristics of social life in poverty-level communities are determined by the structural conditions and attitudes which prevail in the larger society, (2) that access to dominant values is severely limited to those poverty groups against whom discrimination is leveled, and (3) that differential discrimination and differential access to dominant society values result in a determinable community profile were tested. To empirically test propositions related to the objective and attitudinal effects of poverty and racial discrimination, scales designed to measure socioeconomic status, participation in community and national-level institutions and activities, job satisfaction potential, attitudes toward deviant behavior, and internal-external control were established. Data pertaining to objective access and attitudes were obtained by administering a 30-minute questionnaire to an adult member of each household (257 respondents) in an agriculturally based community of less than 1,000 population in eastern Arkansas. The findings indicated that the complexities of social life as measured by the scales cannot be viewed simply as a function of the racial dichotomy of the rural South. Although the racial division is an important one, discriminant function analyses showed that commonalities among groups of comparable income levels, educational attainment, and age are often greater than among groups of common racial identity. (HBC)

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SOCIOLOGICAL CORREIATES OF POVERTY AND RACE IN A RURAL ARKANSAS COMMUNITY

by

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SOCIOLOGICAL CORRELATES OF POVERTY AND RACE IN A RURAL ARKANSAS COMMUNITY

The present study was designed to test a number of hypotheses concerning the sociological correlates of poverty and race which previous investigators had posited. It was postulated that the predominant characteristics of social life in poverty-level communities are determined by the structural conditions and attitudes which prevail in the larger society. Access to dominant values is severely limited to those poverty groups against whom discrimination is leveled. Differential discrimination and differential access to dominant society values were predicted to result in a determinable community profile.

To empirically test propositions related to the objective and attitudinal effects of poverty and racial discrimination, scales designed to measure socio-economic status, participation in community and national-level institutions and activities, job satisfaction potential, attitudes toward deviant behavior, and internal-external control were established. Black and white racial groups divided by sex, income, education, age and welfare status criteria were then compared on these scales using multivariate analysis of variance with a step-down procedure and discriminant function analysis. The technique of principal components was used to weight scale items in a manner that would be valid in terms of the population studied, thus eliminating arbitrary weighting.

Methods Used and Population Studied

Madison, Arkansas, is an agriculturally based community of less than 1000 population in the eastern part of the state. Although some 75 percent of the population is black, whites in the community control much of the wealth and have substantially higher mean annual incomes (the white mean take-home household income is $6257 compared with $3264 for black households).

The community has a high percentage of older residents, largely composed of couples or individuals who have left the plantations to retire. A substantial number of the older residents have spent their lives as agricultural workers, and it has been only within the last decade that major industry has come into the area. The population, poorly educated and unskilled, remains generally poor.

Census statistics indicate that demographically Madison is representative of the Mississippi Delta region. Fifty-one percent of the respondents in the sample had attained an educational level of less than 9 years; 48 percent of the households had total 1970 incomes of less than $3000. Today Madison is somewhat unique among southern towns in having a city council composed of all black members and a black mayor. Black participation in community activities and voting is relatively high. Although the political activity of blacks may tend to separate the community from other towns, there is evidence that throughout the South there is a trend for blacks to become increasingly active in local politics. Recent studies have shown a growing feeling among blacks that it is through the election of local black representatives that day-to-day living conditions can be improved.

Data pertaining to objective access and attitudes were obtained via a 30 minute questionnaire which was administered to an adult member of each household in the study community. The community sample consisted of 257 respondents.

Socio-Economic Status (SES)

The relationship between racial identity and SES as measured by household income, material possessions, and the occupational status of the household head was apparent, regardless of the population division used. Black respondents of comparable age, educational level, or welfare status with white respondents consistently scored substantially lower on the SES

scale. This means that if a black and white household are matched in relationship to the age and educational level of the respondent, welfare status, and yearly household take-home income, the white household would be likely to receive a higher SES score. Furthermore, the black adult is likely to belong to a household in which more individuals reside, resulting in a lower per capita income and consequent lower level of living.

However, the picture for the black population is not entirely gloomy. An analysis of SES by age groups shows that blacks between the ages of 17-30 have a higher mean score on the SES scale than do older groups. Nevertheless, there is still a large discrepancy between the SES score of 17-30 year old whites and blacks. As expected, for both the white and black populations, age, income, education, and welfare status were related to scores on the SES inventory. Increased education and higher incomes were associated with higher group means on the SES scale; increased age and on-welfare status contributed to lower SES scores.

Participation (PART)

According to Oscar Lewis (1966b: 21), "the disengagement, the non-integration of the poor with respect to the major institutions of society is a crucial element in the culture of poverty." Valentine (1968: 130) maintains that because of external forces which are largely beyond their control, poor populations have low rates of participation in such institutions as stable employment, property ownership, labor unions, and higher education. At the same time these poverty-level groups display high rates of participation in the police-courts-prison complex, armed services, welfare system, and primary public education. The PART scale utilized in this research was designed to test participation in those realms which would positively affect one's SES.

As expected, group means on the PART scale were related to factors of sex, race, income, education, and welfare status. In most analyses, the scores of whites were higher than those for blacks, indicating both the low social position of blacks in the socio-economic hierarchy of the rural South and the lack of opportunity that blacks have had to participate in a "closed society" structure. Nevertheless, blacks with relatively high incomes, higher levels of educational attainment, and younger ages were likely to score higher on the PART scale than blacks who were relatively poor, uneducated, and old. Blacks on welfare or with $6001-9000 annual household incomes had higher PART scores than comparable whites. Thus, data indicate that opportunity for participation in such institutions as secondary and higher education, the military services, property ownership, stable employment, and special job training seems to be increasing for young rural blacks. A comparison between blacks and whites indicates the advantaged position of whites.

Job Satisfaction Potential (JSP)

Both the PART and SES scales were objective measures of social position, insofar as their components contained no attitudinal information. The JSP scale, in contrast, contained both objective and subjective components. That is, the JSP scale tapped information pertaining to objective barriers to employment: transportation, health problems, present employment status, job training, access to information about employment opportunities, as well as subjective or attitudinal variables which might deter employment success: reasons for not looking for a job, willingness to work if employment were offered, willingness to move or to commute to obtain employment, and attitudes toward previous employment.

Although, as expected, males of both races had higher mean scores on the JSP scale than females, the relationship of race and JSP is more complex

than expected. Unlike the relationship hypothesized, blacks did not uniformly have lower mean scores on the index than whites. Instead, for some population groupings, it was found that the JSP mean score for blacks exceeded that for comparable white groups. For example, the JSP mean score for blacks age 17-30 exceeded that for 17-30 year old whites. Additionally the JSP score for blacks both in the $6001-9000 income category and in the over $9000 income division exceeded that for whites. Also, the JSP score for blacks off welfare was somewhat higher than for whites off welfare. It appears from the data that blacks who are of young age (17-30 years old) or who have household incomes of $6000 or more have as much or more potential for employment success as whites. Data indicate that with increased employment opportunities to achieve moderate income levels, potential for job satisfaction increases. These findings are in contradiction with hypothesized expectations that the JSP of blacks would be uniformly less than that of whites within income, age, education, and welfare categories. Certainly these findings have important policy implications. The notion that blacks would refuse to work if employment opportunities were available is dispelled. Indeed, young and middle income blacks state that they are more willing to work, to move, or to commute to obtain employment than comparable whites, and these black groups hold better images of work.

Internal-External Control and Attitudes toward Deviant Behavior (I-E and ATD)

According to Lewis (1966b: 23), individuals within the culture of poverty exhibit "a strong feeling of marginality, of helplessness, of dependency, and of inferiority . . . little ability to defer gratification and to plan for the future . . . resignation and fatalism."

Observed deviance, too, is greater in the lower socio-economic classes. Such deviant behavior occurs not because deviance per se is valued, but

because such behavior may lead to the attainment of valued goals. Thus, it was expected that tolerance of deviant behavior would be most apparent among those groups which cannot achieve through the same channels as mainstream Americans but who desire the dreams of American success as much as any others.

It was expected from the literature on poverty that blacks, because of their disadvantaged position in society, would be more tolerant of deviant behavior than whites and would also be more externally controlled.* The structure of the socio-economic system severaly penalizes racial minorities in the United States, and it would follow logically that saving, planning for the future, and belief in one's ability to shape his own destiny would be reduced severely among the black segment of the population. It was further expected that internal control and intolerance of deviant behavior would increase with educational attainment and income. Females were expected to be less tolerant of deviant behavior and more externally controlled than males. Those groups on welfare were expected to be more tolerant of deviance and more externally controlled than non-welfare groups.

Data from the study only partially confirmed these hypotheses. Blacks were not categorically more tolerant of deviant behavior or more externally controlled than whites. As expected, white females were the group most intolerant of deviance, followed by black females. Contrary to the hypothesized relationship, black and white males were more externally controlled than females. However, blacks between the ages of 17-30 were more internally controlled than whites in the same age group. Although attitudes of younger blacks were not as predicted, they were consistent with the relatively high scores of that group on SES, PART, and JSP scales.

Internal control increased with household income, with black respondents

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*Statements taken from J. Rotter's I-E scale were used to measure internal versus external control.

who resided in households with total yearly take-home incomes exceeding $9000 being most internally controlled. Once again, internal control for black respondents exceeded that for whites. Similarly, white respondents from households with less than a $3000 yearly take-home income were more externally controlled than blacks on the same income level. Blacks who had educational levels exceeding 11th grade were also more internally controlled than comparably educated whites. Blacks with less than a 7th grade education were less externally controlled than whites with a similar educational attainment.

Tolerance of deviant behavior seems largely unrelated to educational level or household income, as whites from higher income groups and with greater educational achievement were more tolerant of deviance than their less educated and lower income white counterparts. Young whites were the most tolerant of deviant behavior, perhaps demonstrating the lack of community bonding characteristic of this group. Although on-welfare black groups were more tolerant of deviance than off-welfare groups, both on- and off-welfare white groups were more intolerant of deviance than the black groups. The I-E and ATD scales did not consistently correlate in the expected manner, although there was some tendency in this direction.

In a community with as strongly fundamentalist religious attitudes as Madison, it would be expected that verbal attitudes toward deviance would indicate a strong rejection of deviant acts, even though verbalized norms and actual behavior might well be discrepant. Also, it is to be expected that deviant behavior would be more strongly condemned in a small rural community than in an urban setting.

Although the ATD scale provided some useful information concerning group differences, data did not permit the formulation of a general theory of deviance for the population. The step-down analysis also revealed that the ATD scale was the least useful scale in accounting for population differences.

Data from the I-E scale bring into question the validity of the popular notion that the poor are fatalistic, present-oriented, and do not defer gratification. Blacks who are affluent and educated are more internally controlled than their aged, poor, ill-educated counterparts. And groups of blacks are not unifurmly more external in orientation than comparable groups of whites. Data indicate that rural blacks in Madison do not exhibit the degree of hopelessness, fatalism, and search for immediate rewards that many observers have attributed to deprived populations. Research data would tend to refute the idea that it is the "culture of poverty" with its inherent attitudes-set which is deterring the progress of blacks. The widely accepted notion that the rural poor black has given up hope for a better tommorrow seems unfounded in light of the present data. In no analysis were attitudinal variables as significant in explaining variance between groups as the more objective measures of SES, PART, and JSP.

From the findings of this study, it appears that the complexities of social life as measured by SES, PART, JSP, I-E, and ATD scales cannot be viewed simply as a function of the racial dichotomy of the rural South. Although high SES and PART are more easily obtained by whites in the community, attitudes of blacks toward employment, deviant behavior, and internal-external control do not appear to be hampering the successful upward mobility of the black population. Although the racial division is an important one in understanding the complexities of social life, discriminant function analyses showed that commonalities among groups of comparable income levels, educational attainment, and age are often greater than among groups of common racial identity.

Conclusions

The degree to which conclusions from the present study can be generalized to the black population of the rural South is unclear. The author would maintain that a number of the characteristics of Madison blacks and whites are conditioned by the demographic, social, economic, and political variables operating in the community.

Madison, and the surrounding county, for example are experiencing a situation of in-migration and expanding employment opportunity. Industries have surpassed agriculture in the past decade as the major source of employment, and incomes, although low by national standards, have markedly improved during the same time period. It is true that some respondents remarked that they did not like the nature of factory employment, but few felt that the major industries in the area were as racially discriminatory in their practices as agricultural employers.

Additionally, efforts geared toward increasing black participation in the political process have been most successful. A high percentage of Madison residents are registered voters and reported that they voted in the last election. The presence of a black mayor and black city councilmen attest to black political power in the community. Black people in Madison can turn to elected officials who are responsive to their needs. The presence of positive attitudes among Madison respondents may well be related to the expanding economy, decline of agricultural employment, in-migration, rising income levels, and the increased political power of blacks in the community. .Madison, however, is not atypical of rural Southern communities. Industry is becoming more decentralized in the South, agricultural employment is waning, and blacks are becoming more active in local and state governments. Thus, Madison may provide a model for predicting behavioral and attitudinal patterns associated with rising income levels, increased employment opportunities

in industry, and increased power among blacks.

It is suggested that a black rural population with a heavy rate of out-migration, stable or decreasing employment opportunities, and a lack of opportunity for political participation might display less positive scores on the SES, PART, JSP, I-E, and ATD scales. Further research might explore the impact of such variables as the relative effectiveness of the local political structure in meeting community needs, expanding or contracting economic and employment opportunities, and in- and out-migration as forces affecting behavior, socio-economic status, and attitudes.

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